FACT SHEET No. 4

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National Resource Center for Safe Schools

Recognizing and Preventing Bullying

Bullies harass and terrorize their victims, driving many into depression and isolation. Victims often later become perpetrators of violence themselves. In extreme cases, victims strike back with deadly force, as they have in recent acts of multiple murder in schools.

Aggressive behavior and bullying are learned early—often when a child is turned across a parent's knee—and become increasingly hard to correct after age eight.[1] Early prevention is essential.

LONG-TERM DAMAGE

Bullies identified by age eight are six times more likely than non-bullies to be convicted of a crime by the time they reach age 24 and five times more likely to end up with serious criminal records by age 30.[2] Children who are chronic bullies seem to remain bullies as adults.

Fear leads many victims to turn against school. Some 7 percent of America's eighth-graders stay home at least once a month because of bullies.[2] Being bullied often increases isolation, depression, and low self-esteem, which can affect victims for the rest of their lives.

WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying can be direct or indirect and varies between boys and girls. Direct bullying is the kind of action that the word generally brings to mind, including physical violence, taunting and teasing, threats of violence, and extortion or theft.

In recent years, the academic definition of bullying has been expanded to include indirect bullying, such as name calling, spreading rumors, and exclusion from a peer group. Indirect bullying socially isolates children. Both forms of bullying occur repeatedly and over a prolonged time. Boys typically engage in direct bullying while girls tend to use indirect methods, though girls are less frequently either bullies or victims. Approximately 15 percent of students are either bullied regularly or are themselves bullies.[2] (This translates to approximately 5 million elementary and middle school students.[3]) Direct bullying seems to increase through elementary school, peak during middle school or junior high school, and decline during high school. While physical assaults decrease with age, verbal abuse appears to remain constant. Variations between schools seem to have little affect on bullying, with size, racial composition, and setting (urban, suburban, or rural) making little difference.

BULLIES

Bullies often come from homes where physical punishment is used and where children are taught to strike back physically as a way of handling problems. Thus, they believe that it is all right for stronger children to hit weaker children. Bullies frequently lack parental warmth and involvement and seem to desire power and control. They derive satisfaction from inflicting injury and suffering and have little empathy for their victims.

Conventional wisdom holds that bullies act because they lack self-esteem and are insecure. On the contrary, bullies appear to suffer little anxiety and possess strong self-esteem.

VICTIMS

Passive loners are the most frequent and most typical victims, especially if they cry easily or lack social self-defense skills. Many are unable to deflect a conflict with humor and don't think quickly on their feet. Victims are typically anxious, insecure, cautious, and suffer from low self-esteem. They rarely defend themselves or retaliate and tend to lack friends, making them easy to isolate. Ten to 15 percent of victims are "provocative victims," restless children who tease bullies and are easily aroused emotionally.[4]

Physical characteristics such as weight, dress, or wearing eyeglasses do not appear to be significant factors in victimization. Victims do, however, tend to be physically weaker than their peers.

MIXING AGE GROUPS REDUCES BULLYING

Aggression and bullying seem to be a reflection of dominance and hierarchical behavior among primates. As this behavior is part of life, the question is how to reduce and prevent activity that crosses the line into bullying. Levels of aggression and bullying appear higher when children represent the same general age group. In mixed-age groups of children, aggression and bullying appear to be reduced.

While older children do tend to dominate younger children, this is not the same as bullying. Older chil-

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dren are frequently nurturing, protecting younger children and helping them learn.

HOW TO FIGHT BULLYING

Bullies often lie easily and believably when denying their activity, making intervention hard unless they are caught in the act of bullying. A brief no-nonsense talk seems more effective than long lectures. Suspensions and other punishments either work the first time or likely not at all, according to some researchers. Facing immediate consequences, such as having to replace broken property, can work better. Bullies also do well when allowed to rechannel their power, making them the protectors of other children in roles such as the safety patrol.

Victims need help developing the social skills to defuse situations and walk away from developing conflict.

PROGRAMS TO COMBAT BULLYING

Bullying occurs throughout the school, though teachers and parents are generally unaware of its extent. Making the situation worse, adults often believe that bullying is "part of growing up" and that they should not intervene. In one study, 71 percent of students reported that adults in the classroom ignored bullying. When asked, students uniformly said that they wanted teachers to intervene to stop bullying and teasing. Faced with adult indifference, children are either reluctant to get involved or do not know how to obtain help. Adults in schools must intervene to stop bullies.

Bullying must be fought throughout the school community, using a "whole-school" approach. Effective interventions focus on more than the perpetrators and victims. Schoolwide bullying policies need to include curricular measures such as teaching conflict resolution and assertiveness training, peer and professional counseling, and improvement of the physical school environment to allow easier adult supervision.

Schools that have implemented anti-bullying programs have reported a 50 percent reduction in bullying, according to Dan Olweus, a professor at the University of Bergen who pioneered research on bullying.[5]

Olweus suggests intervening simultaneously at the school, class, and individual levels. His recommendations have been blended with those from the National Association of School Psychologists[6] below:

- Use a questionnaire for students and adults to assess the extent of the problem and make the school community aware of bullying
- Prepare an information campaign directed at parents to increase their awareness and the importance of their involvement in prevention
- Promote facts, not myths about bullying and aggression
- Teachers and students should jointly develop rules against bullying
- Provide individual counseling for both bullies and victims
- Provide cooperative learning activities to reduce social isolation
- Implement intervention strategies to deal with aggressive children
- Increase adult supervision at times when victims are especially vulnerable, such as recess or lunch

A number of principles can be worked into the regular curriculum:

- Discuss how kids are different and how they are the same
- Examine the meaning of courage and lead students beyond the "superhero" image of bravery
- Promote friendship between students who differ from each other
- Promote friendship between boys and girls
- Talk about teasing and bullying throughout the year, not just following an incident

LISTEN TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT BULLYING

If your children are being bullied, it is vital to listen to what they tell you. Parents should make it clear that bullying is not the victim's fault, and that children do not have to face bullying on their own. Ask how they have been dealing with bullies. Talk about other ways to deal with them.

Children should first try ignoring the bully, telling the bully to stop, and walking away. Encourage your children to always tell an adult they trust about the bully. Explain that they are not telling tales, they are protecting themselves and may actually be helping the bully. The key to promoting positive interactions among young children is teaching them to assert themselves effectively.

For additional information, contact the Center at the address or phone number on the front of this fact sheet, or go to our Web site, www.safetyzone.org/ and click on "Bullying" under "Hot Topics."

1 Maine Project Against Bullying. (1998). *Welcome to Maine Project Against Bullying: Brave enough |to be kind.* Wiscasset, ME: Wiscasset Primary School. Retrieved December 17, 1999, from the World Wide Web: lincoln.midcoast.com/~wps/against/bullying.html

2 Banks, R. (1997). *Bullying in schools* (ERIC Digest No. EDO-PS-97-17). Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. Retrieved December 17, 1999, from the World Wide Web: ericeece.org/pubs/digests/1997/banks97.html

3 Batsche, G., & Moore, B. (1992). Bullying fact sheet. In *Behavioral interventions: Creating a safe environment in our schools* (pp. 14-16). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists, National Mental Health and Education Center for Children and Families. Retrieved December 17, 1999 from the World Wide Web: www.naspweb.org/center/pdf/nmhec.pdf

4 Seppa, M. (1996). Keeping schoolyards safe from bullies: Psychologists design a program to help tormented children look out for themselves. *APA Monitor, (27)*10. Retrieved December 17, 1999, from the World Wide Web: www.uncg.edu/edu/ericcass/bullying/DOCS/bullies.htm

5 Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do.* Malden, MA: Blackwell.

6 Batsche, G.M. (1997). Bullying. In G. Bear, K. Minke, & A. Thomas (Eds.), *Children's needs: Development, problems and alternatives* (pp. 171-180). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. Retrieved December 17, 1999, from the World Wide Web: www.naspweb.org/bullying.pdf